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**Identity Work in the Everyday Life of**

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# **Sober Intoxication: Institutional Contradictions and Identity Work in the Everyday Life of Four Religious Communities in Italy**

**Simona Giorgi, Stefania Palmisano**

## **Abstract**

This study explores how organization members manage institutional contradictions in their everyday life without aiming at change-oriented agency. Drawing on interviews, observations, and archival data from four religious communities in Italy, we find that when organization members experience institutional contradictions between two logics that provide conflicting identity prescriptions but to which they are emotionally attached, they engage in identity work that helps them ameliorate – but not eliminate – tensions that surface when identity elements do not align. More specifically, identity work proved integral to reaching a temporary identity truce, or reconciliation of experienced contradictions, through distancing from illegitimate others and embedding of one's identity within an established tradition. These findings draw attention to the role of contradictions in institutional maintenance, extending theory that has tended to focus on the experience of contradictions as a source of institutional change. We discuss implications for managing institutional contradictions in everyday organizational life.

In contemporary organizational life, multiple logics provide individuals with potentially conflicting prescriptions for their identities (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Washington & Ventresca, 2008), fostering the experience of institutional contradictions – ‘inconsistencies and tensions’ within and between institutional arrangements (Seo & Creed, 2002, p. 222). The existence of institutional contradictions is problematic for organization members, because they are the ones who ultimately enact institutional logics in everyday life (Glynn, 2000). For example, in commercial microfinance organizations, employees experienced tensions between the logic of traditional banking, which placed the emphasis on profits and efficiency, and the logic of social activism, which aimed at the economic development and empowerment of the local population (Battilana & Dorado, 2010).

Since the experience of institutional contradictions is challenging and often uncomfortable for organization members (Voronov & Vince, 2012), it can push individuals to re-think who they are and what they do. Such change in individuals’ awareness can translate into a project of institutional change that aims at resolving, or at least minimizing, contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002). For example, when confronted with a contradiction between the inclusiveness of the Christian Gospel and the actual marginalization of LGBT people in their institution, ministers in two Protestant denominations used this experience as the impetus for modernizing the church from within (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010). Similarly, in a credit card company in Korea, employees struggled to reconcile the contradictions between traditional banking principles and newly introduced Western logics of management, leading to the introduction of a new logic that bridged the two (Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014). In sum, the experience of contradictions can spur a shift in collective awareness that fosters change.

While the impact of institutional contradictions on change is well documented, our understanding of how the experience of contradictions can also fuel the maintenance of institutions is more limited. In instances when change is not considered an option, organization members that are confronted with conflicting identity prescriptions must find a resolution that helps them construct and assert a coherent sense of self (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014; Giddens, 1991). This situation can be encountered across a variety of settings, from reinsurance trading, in which individuals must balance the demands of market and community logics (Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015), to hospitals, in which expectations of patients’ care and financial accountability must be fulfilled (Reay & Hinings, 2005), and legal courts, in which actors

often mix-and-match competing logics (McPherson & Sauder, 2013). To remedy this theoretical gap, we set out to address the following research question: How can organization members resolve, or at least ameliorate, their experience of institutional contradictions without engaging in change-oriented agency?

We believe this question is important for at least two reasons. First, this article responds to an ongoing call to understand the *lived* experience of institutions, which pushes scholars towards a more detailed understanding of the micro-level processes (Creed et al., 2010; Powell & Colyvas, 2008) that affect not only the transformation, but also the maintenance of institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Weeks, 2004). Though projects of institutional change are highly significant events, they are relatively rare, and we still need to account for the bulk of organizational life (e.g., Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014). Second, exploration of this under-theorized aspect of institutional contradictions is timely because contemporary organizations increasingly operate in pluralistic fields (Kraatz & Block, 2008), undergo ceaseless changes (Swan, Bresnen, Robertson, Newell, & Dopson, 2010), and combine logics from different domains (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). These realities of contemporary organizations make the experience of contradictions a potentially recurrent phenomenon for many organization members.

To better understand how individuals manage their experience of institutional contradictions without becoming change agents, we conducted an inductive, qualitative study of four religious communities in Italy. Members of these organizations defined themselves as mystics – and as such, for example, spoke in tongues and performed healings during religious rituals – and, at the same time, as Roman Catholics, who looked at mystic practices with suspicion. These tensions were indicative of a deeper contradiction. On the one hand, since the mid-1960s, the Catholic Church had encouraged novel forms of spirituality, spurring the founding of new mystic religious communities and applauding their membership growth. On the other hand, mainstream Catholics viewed these new communities as potentially illegitimate cults (Leahy, 2011; Urquhart, 1999). We suggest that the management of conflicting prescriptions was salient within this context, providing an extreme setting (Eisenhardt, 1989) in which to examine the ongoing resolution of institutional contradictions.

We found that to resolve the contradiction in the identity prescriptions of mainstream Catholicism and their community's mysticism, organization members engaged in identity work (e.g., Creed et al., 2010) that helped them ameliorate tensions stemming

from misalignment among identity elements. More specifically, by *distancing* themselves from illegitimate others – healers and psychics who fraudulently claimed to be mystics – and by *embedding* their identity as mystics within the Catholic tradition, they achieved a temporary identity truce that mitigated the experience of contradictions while maintaining the status quo.

Our insights make three contributions to discussions of institutional contradictions. First, we complement existing research by showing how the experience of contradictions can contribute to institutional maintenance. We expect this to be important in settings in which organization members do not see change as a viable or desirable option. Second, we identify two mechanisms of resolution of contradictions – distancing and embedding – that allow organization members to make sense of the competing prescriptions of two logics that impinge on the construction of a consistent and stable selfhood. Finally, we integrate these mechanisms in a theoretical model that shows how organization members recursively experience contradictions, engage in identity work to resolve them, and reach a temporary truce that helps them reconcile, but not resolve, conflicting identity prescriptions in everyday organizational life.

## **Experiencing and Managing Institutional Contradictions**

### **Institutional logics and contradictions**

Institutions guide and constrain human behavior by providing logics – ‘sets of material practices and symbolic constructions’ (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248) that prescribe and proscribe ‘identities, sources of interest, and bases of action’ (Washington & Ventresca, 2008, p. 33). By providing ‘social actors with vocabularies of motives and senses of self’ (Lok, 2010, p. 1308), institutional logics tend to ensure actors’ predictability of behavior and institutions’ durability over time through a concatenation of scripts, norms, and rules (Rao & Giorgi, 2006); yet they can also lead to the experience of contradictions, especially when two or more logics coexist in a setting and offer conflicting guidance (Swan et al., 2010).

Research shows that the experience of institutional contradictions can generate anxieties that need resolution (Voronov & Vince, 2012). When organizations take on the task of managing contradictions, they do so by fostering compartmentalization of divisions and actors that work under different logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). Otherwise, the experience of contradictions can open up the possibility of change from

within an institution (Clemens & Cook, 1999, p. 449; DiMaggio, 1988), because, when confronted with conflicting institutional prescriptions, individuals may no longer take for granted existing practices or arrangements (Seo & Creed, 2002), cognitively divest from the status quo (Voronov & Vince, 2012), and initiate projects of institutional change. For example, the experience of contradictions in nouvelle cuisine led Ferran Adrià, an elite Spanish chef, to subvert this institution from within and develop molecular gastronomy (Rao & Giorgi, 2006).

### **Identity work and the management of institutional contradictions**

Despite ample evidence that links contradictions with institutional transformation, scholars agree that the experience of institutional contradictions does not automatically translate into change. The ability for transformative agency hinges on a reflexive shift in actors' consciousness (Creed et al., 2010), which is often achieved through identity work – 'the range of activities that individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept' (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348). Through identity work, individuals make sense of their identity, that is, notions of 'who they are' and 'what they do' (Lok, 2010; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Although identity work has been portrayed as an internal mental process that individuals undertake in 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising self-constructions' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626), scholars have also emphasized that its raw materials are institutionally-embedded (Alvesson, 1994).

Research has shown that identity work can deeply affect understanding of our own and others' identities. For example, in post-war Japan, middle-class housewives who belonged to the Seikatsu Club engaged in identity work to change societal perceptions of housework (Leung, Zietsma, & Peredo, 2014). In hospitals, medical residents who perceived a mismatch between what physicians do and who they are engaged in identity work to construct their professional identity (Pratt et al., 2006). More broadly, identity work can help fend off stigma (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005), make sense of role transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), and achieve a desired conception of the self (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009).

When conducted in response to institutional contradictions, identity work consists of a process of identity transformation that leads institutional inhabitants to gain a new

consciousness about their self and realize their need for change. For example, women religious<sup>1</sup> in the US perceived the 2008 Vatican Visitation as a threat; as a consequence, they initially hired Canon lawyers to defend their beliefs and practices. Over time, however, women religious crafted a new identity as ‘Gospel Women’ that asserted their centrality within the Church and prompted a favorable change in leadership (Giorgi, Guider, & Bartunek, 2014). Similarly, before introducing any sort of change, LGBT Protestant ministers engaged in identity work to first accept their sexual orientation and then reconcile it with their religious commitments (Creed et al., 2010). Together these studies suggest that identity work provides the symbolic basis for projects of institutional change that can ameliorate individuals’ experience of institutional contradictions.

### **Managing institutional contradictions without aiming at change**

The focus of current research is on the resolution of the experience of institutional contradictions as change in the present order (Battilana et al., 2009; Seo & Creed, 2002). Yet in certain instances, individuals may not consider change a viable option, for example because they feel emotionally attached to an institution that they want to reproduce over time (Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013), or because they benefit from institutional complexity (Smets et al., 2015). When institutional inhabitants do not aim at introducing change, but at the same time experience institutional contradictions, it is not clear how they can ameliorate their anxieties and achieve a coherent sense of self. In other words, our current understanding of how the experience of contradictions can open up an opportunity for purposeful and reflective action oriented at institutional maintenance is rudimentary. To extend existing theory and fill in what has been left out (Locke, 2001), we conducted a qualitative inductive study of the ongoing experience of institutional contradictions in four religious communities in Italy.

### **Empirical Setting**

The four religious communities examined in this study were Roman Catholic in their affiliation, but were also considered a ‘new’ form of religious expression within the Church (Pope John Paul II, 1998), because they emerged as part of a wave of change after the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), a watershed event that stimulated ‘new

laboratory-like community experiences' (Leahy, 2011, p. 7) and opened religious life to people of all vocations and walks of life (Pope John Paul II, 1998). These new communities were characterized by two main religious orientations, or pathways to holiness (Kroll & Bachrach, 2006) – asceticism and mysticism – which provided believers with profoundly different logics in terms of human agency and relation to the divine, with important implications for these organizations' mission, core activities, and authority structure (Weber, 1978). For example, ascetics viewed people as 'instruments' of a distant God, were actively engaged with the world, and favored rules and hierarchical relationships; mystics, by contrast, portrayed people as empty 'vessels' to be filled by the divine, favored contemplation, and opposed rigid organizational structures (Weber, 1978). Table 1 offers an overview of this distinction.

**Table 1.** A comparison between the logic of mysticism and the logic of asceticism.

	Mysticism	Asceticism
<b>Conceptualization of the divine</b>	Immanent	Transcendent
<b>Relation of person to the divine</b>	A vase to be filled by the divine	An instrument of the divine
<b>Attitude toward the world</b>	Withdrawal from the world	Active engagement
<b>Temporal orientation</b>	Present (signs of divine possession in the now)	Medium/long term (unknowable divine's will is revealed over time)
<b>The self</b>	Self-expression (the self should be free and become an empty vessel for the divine)	Self-discipline (the self should be controlled and restrained to fully focus on the divine)
<b>Mission of the community</b>	Healing	Transformative
<b>Core activities</b>	Oriented to providing an experience	Oriented to performing a set of practical tasks
<b>Nature of the organizational ties</b>	Loose (communities or alliances; different living arrangements are accepted)	Stable (lifelong commitment to a highly regulated community life)
<b>Authority</b>	Diffused, multiple leaders	Clear hierarchy
<b>Organizational membership</b>	Full time and part time (clerical and lay members)	Only full time (clerical)

The communities examined in this study embraced mysticism as their religious orientation, which their members perceived as in conflict with the mandates of mainstream Catholicism. The brief historical review below sheds light on the institutional contradictions associated with mystic Catholicism.

Mysticism, in its Greek etymology, implied a relation to mystery and concealment. In early Christianity the term referred to the 'hidden' allegorical interpretations of Scriptures



and ‘hidden’ presences, such as that of Jesus during religious rituals. Over time, a mystical theology developed, centered on a direct experience of the divine (Gellman, 2014). Christian mystics included, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Clare of Assisi (1194–1253), and Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293–1381). Over time, mysticism gained appeal even beyond the religious sphere, such as in literature, philosophy, and art (e.g., William Blake, William James, and Gian Lorenzo Bernini). Despite its broad appeal, mysticism was the object of considerable criticism within the Catholic Church. For example, Saint Augustine (354–430), a prominent theologian, accused mysticism of paradoxical language and logical fallacies. In the following centuries the Catholic Church censored and labeled as heretics many Christian mystics, such as Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), often rejecting attempts for full reinstatement (McGinn, 2001). Weber (1978) attributed this opposition to mystics’ subversive emphasis on a direct experience of the divine.

Although the Second Vatican Council welcomed new Mystic Catholic Communities (MCCs) as a ‘new form and strategy of witness, dialogue, and proclamation’ (Leahy, 2011, p. 115) that could counteract the Church’s decline in Europe (Leahy, 2011), many within the Church still strongly opposed mysticism (Urquhart, 1999) for its beliefs and practices of speaking in tongues, healings, and exorcisms – elements that were imported from the domain of Protestant neo-Pentecostalism (Poloma, 1989), but that in Italy were more commonly associated with cults. As a result, leaders and members of these communities were officially part of the Church, but at the same time isolated and marginalized (e.g., Romero, 2013).

## **Methods**

To build and elaborate theory on institutional contradictions in everyday life, we adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001) and searched for an ‘extreme case’ (Eisenhardt, 1989), in which the dynamics being examined were more visible than in other contexts (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 238). MCCs represented such a case because their members routinely managed the conflicting yet coexisting logics of mainstream Catholicism and mysticism. Both these logics were constitutive of their religious experience as mystic Catholics; in addition, the loose organizational structure of these communities made it more important for each individual to navigate such contradictions, rather than simply defer to a higher authority.

## Sample

We chose to focus on members of MCCs within the same region in Italy, Piedmont, to mitigate cultural differences due to regionalism in this country (e.g., Mingione, 1993). To remedy potential limitations due to this regional focus, in July 2012 one of the authors, with the help of a research assistant, attended and collected data at the annual national event for MCCs in Rimini, Italy; no significant difference emerged from the analysis of this data. Since some of these communities were located in relatively remote areas and most members and sympathizers were attracted through word of mouth, we initially leveraged personal contacts with the local bishop. Such contacts helped us identify a purposeful sample (Locke, 2001) of four MCCs. In 2008 one of the researchers visited these communities to establish a first contact and build trust. For an historical overview of these four communities – A, B, C, and D (with actual names disguised for confidentiality) – see Table 2.

**Table 2.** An overview of the four MCCs.**Community A**

This community was established in 1978 in Torino, Italy, by two laypeople, a man and a woman. During a prayer meeting, a priest told them that he had received a prophetic image: God was angry with them because they had ignored for too long His call to form a community. The two thus decided to start a community together with three other people. Soon, around 30 members joined the group that met for prayers on a regular basis. At the beginning of the 1990s, the community felt the need for a more radical form of engagement. The mission was changed to evangelization, with a preference for 'charismata' connected with physical and spiritual healings (including exorcisms). To this end, Community A organized monthly healing masses in a downtown chapel. The unexpected influx of believers seeking help led the leaders to look for more spacious accommodation and, with the support of the local clergy, the group obtained permission to use a larger church. In recent years, the controversies surrounding the community's practices led it to suspend its healing rituals and focus on prayers.

**Community B**

In the late 1970s the founder of this community, a priest originally from Argentina, received an 'effusion of the Spirit' and considered joining a cloistered monastic community. A series of prophecies, however, led him to change his mind and found his own community, 'a house of prayer open to all'. A small community was then formed and granted recognition by the Italian episcopate in 1979. Years of growth followed, though this expansion was not spearheaded by the founder who, following a complaint filed by a follower to whom he had promised to heal a relative with cancer in return for a large sum of money, was sentenced to three years of imprisonment for fraud. This event exacerbated his relationship – already strained – with the Italian episcopate. He was prohibited from exercising the ministry; still, the community, under the guidance of his closest associates, and with the support of several Eastern European bishops, was able to grow despite these setbacks. The bulk of the community's income, however, was still in the form of donations from people who believed they had been healed or had received other miracles.

**Community C**

A university professor founded this community in the late 1970s after receiving a prophecy during prayer: 'with Jesus, on Jesus build', accompanied by the image of a trowel. Inspired by this prophecy, he invited friends and students to pray together one evening a week. This was the first nucleus of Community C, which over the years experienced tremendous growth, especially among young people, and focused on evangelization. Supported by the Vatican, Community C later founded prayer groups in many Italian cities.

**Community D**

A laywoman founded this community in 1997 in a small rural town near Vercelli. After holding leadership positions in the charismatic renewal movement for nearly 20 years, she felt the need for a deeper commitment – and a different spiritual approach. She considered joining an existing community, but two prophetic events made her change her mind. In a prayer meeting with other charismatic groups, a congregant prophesized that she would soon lead a new community. Somewhat later during a similar occasion, a priest confirmed this revelation. A couple of years later, three people, including a priest, suggested joining forces and creating a community under her guidance. In the past 15 years, the community has experienced considerable growth, attracting mostly local residents; the community saw evangelization as one of its main charismata ('Making Christ known with the power of the Holy Spirit'), and organized healing prayer meetings, masses of intercession for the ill, and pilgrimages to Marian sites.

**Data**

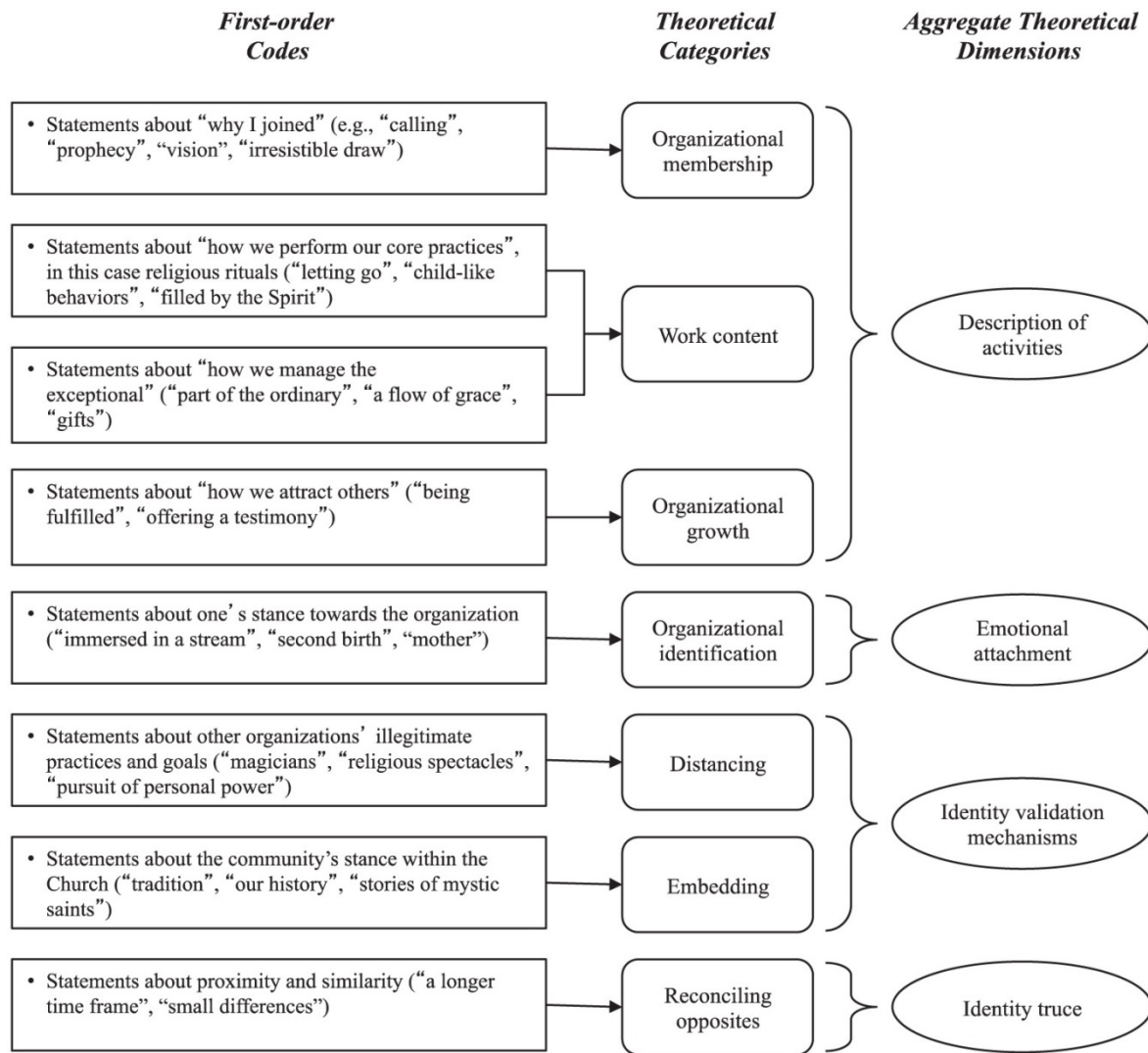
Between 2009 and 2013, we conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with active members of these communities, complemented by non-participant observations and

archival data. The interviews started with a biographical format, asking individuals to describe in detail their spiritual journey and to report on their experiences as members of these religious organizations. We asked open-ended questions to allow participants to create options for responding and voice their own experiences and perspectives. Most interviews lasted about one hour and a half, with several running as long as three hours. This data source was complemented by non-participant observations of religious services, meetings, healings, and casual discussions. We supplemented this data with archival materials – books, magazine and newspaper articles, and websites on the topic.

Our participants were all brought up within mainstream Catholicism in Italy; of our 30 interviewees, 18 were women; some were working, others were retired; some members shared a house, while others lived on their own and joined the community mostly for prayers and meetings. For example, FB had worked as an elementary school teacher for almost 30 years. Once retired, she decided to study theology and psychology. In the early 1990s, she had joined a friend for a mystic prayer service and discovered ‘a new way to relate to God’. She became more and more involved in Community A and, by the time she was interviewed in 2013, she led the prayers and managed many administrative aspects of the organization.

### Data analysis

For our data analysis, we followed an iterative procedure, moving between the data and an emerging structure of theoretical arguments (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, we read through the data for general meaning and assigned first-order codes. For example, we identified sets of statements about ‘why I joined’, ‘how we attract others’, or ‘how we perform miracles’. Second, we aggregated these codes into theoretical categories: for example, the activities around which they experienced contradictions (‘organizational membership’, ‘organizational growth’, or ‘work content’). Finally, we derived some aggregate theoretical dimensions, such as ‘description of activities’ or ‘identity validation mechanisms’. When this coding scheme allowed us to code additional data without the need for new categories, theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Figure 1 offers an overview of data structure.



**Figure 1.** Overview of data structure.

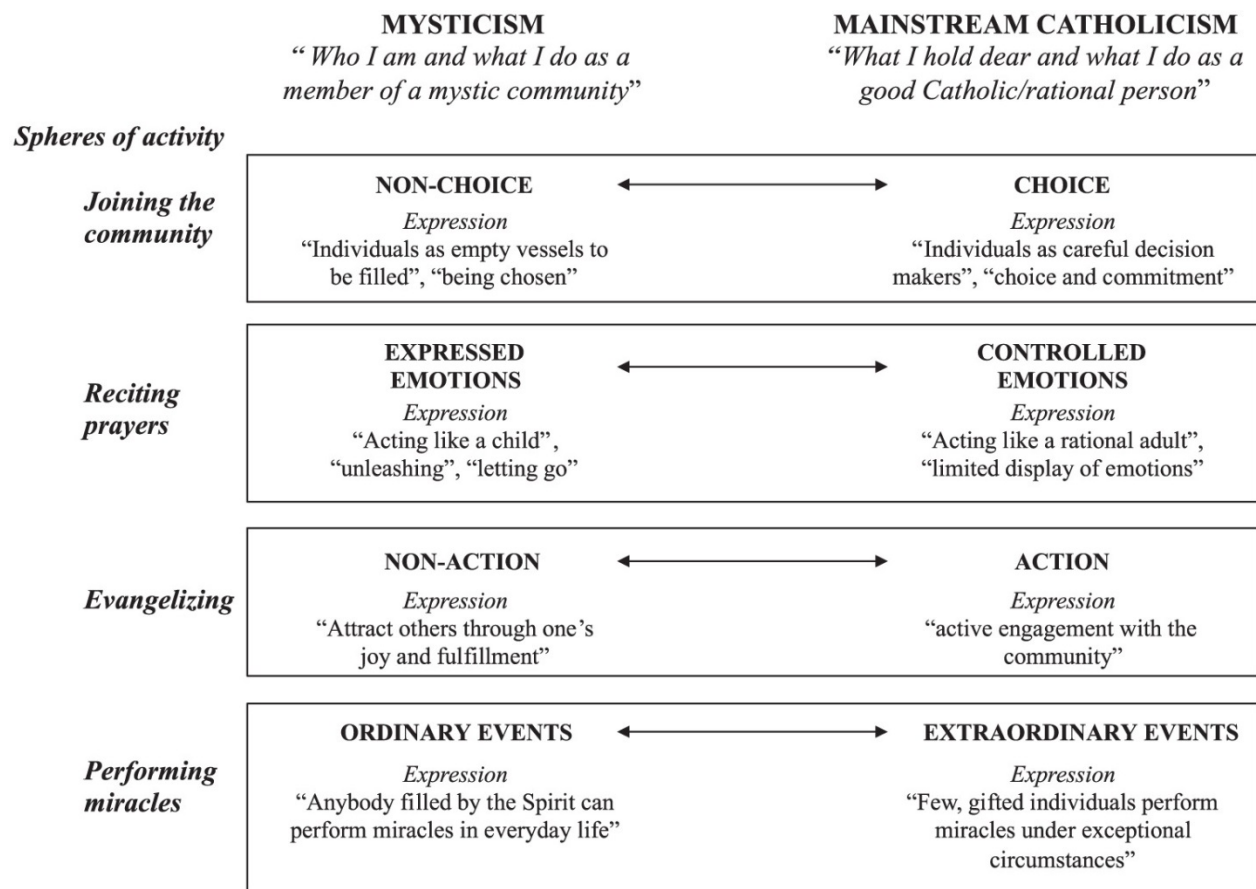
## Institutional Contradictions and Identity Work in Everyday Life

Our participants routinely experienced institutional contradictions between the logic of mainstream Catholicism and the logic of mysticism: they defined themselves as mystics, and engaged in mystic practices such as healings and speaking in tongues, yet, at the same time, believed themselves to be ‘rational beings’ and ‘good Catholics’. Though from an etic perspective rationality and faith are generally distinct sources of authority upon which identities and beliefs can rest (e.g., Friedland, 2013a), in their emic interpretations our participants conflated the two. This was likely due to the pervasiveness of Catholicism in Italy and the participants’ early socialization in this cultural milieu, which made many of the Church’s prescriptions appear rational and common sense.

The management of institutional contradictions was a part of organization members' everyday life. Our participants readily admitted that mysticism had a negative connotation in mainstream Catholicism and a variety of events prompted them to routinely experience tensions or conflicts in their beliefs and practices: news in the media, dialogues with members of other communities, or self reflections (e.g., remembering one's previous career) led them to ponder the misalignment between different elements of their identity, as the quote below exemplifies:

Some of the challenges we live are ordinary tensions within our communities, within ourselves as Catholics, and with other men and women religious in our diocese, because we try to unify what we do with who we are and what they do, and sometimes we succeed, but it's not always easy ... it's just the reality of the (spiritual) movement.

More specifically, organization members' discussions of these ordinary tensions emerged in relation to four main spheres of activity: joining the community, reciting prayers, evangelizing, and performing miracles. For each of these dimensions, our participants identified a set of perceived oppositions (Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008), which they believed were particularly salient to describe their experience. Below we detail the outlined oppositions for each dimension, as summarized in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The experience of institutional contradictions as inconsistencies and tensions.

### Joining the community

Our interviewees identified their decision to establish or join a MCC as a source of contradictions. In recalling the circumstances that led them to found a new community, the participants talked about a ‘higher calling’, which had revealed itself either through a personal vision or others’ prophecies. Although the language of a calling was in line with their activities in the religious sphere (e.g., Creed et al., 2010), organization founders struggled to reconcile the mandates of mainstream Catholicism, which valued choice, and their ‘non-choice’ in responding to a mystic calling. Such tension led participants to question their identity, as the following quote exemplifies:

We did not choose to come here ... it was not a matter of choice. We used to attend Mass every Sunday and go on spiritual retreats whenever we could; we were good Catholics and well respected up in [location]. But the prophecies kept coming and we had no choice. We felt possessed by the desire to create something new. We could not

explain why – we simply had to. At the time, I had nightmares and I was crying a lot ... who are we becoming, evangelists?

Similarly, community members explained how, after an initial and often serendipitous encounter, their commitment to their MCC was the result of an irresistible draw that conflicted with their identity, as the quote below illustrates:

I attended one of their services because a friend of mine had said good things about it, but after the first meeting I decided I was not going back – it was too much for me. I am a calm, rational person. I was a psychologist before [my retirement] and I thought I had seen it all. I thought what's wrong with these people? How can I explain what is going on here? I guess I did not really choose to join, but it felt so natural, like everything clicked in the right place ... I had to go back for more.

Consistent with the quote above, participants reported an internal tug-of-war between rationality and their experience during mystic rituals, which led them to return to the group and eventually join it. This tension was indicative of a broader institutional contradiction between the two logics' pictures of human agency: the 'non-choice' of mysticism, according to which people are empty vessels to be chosen by the divine, and the emphasis on 'choice' in mainstream Catholicism, which, in the perspective of the participants, encouraged the careful evaluation of one's decisions. As a result, joining or founding a MCC was seen as the result of a potentially illegitimate practice, such as brainwashing:

Some people, who were already active in their parish, were drawn to found a new community, like it happened to [name]. From this calling something positive came about, and I joined [the community] spontaneously ... not that I was brainwashed or anything like that. People were free to join.

In sum, when reflecting on their experience of joining a MCC, individuals perceived a tension in their identities as 'good Catholics' and mystics, who simply had to surrender and respond to the call of the divine.

### Reciting prayers

Our participants also perceived the recitation of prayers as a source of institutional contradictions. Because of their Catholic upbringing, community members used as a reference point for evaluating MCCs' rituals the traditional Catholic Mass, in which the interaction between the audience (the congregants) and the performer (the celebrating



priest) was closely scripted; audience participation was limited to a given set of responses (for example, the acclamation 'Alleluia!' after the reading of the Gospel). By contrast, mystic rituals were frequently interrupted by the free flow of emotions of the congregants, who cried, spoke in tongues, described a prophecy, or recounted a personal story. Organization members described their initial experience of mystic rituals as shocking and unsettling. As one participant put it:

We probably behave like crazies ... people telling their life story to complete strangers or reconciling with their spouse after years of silence and misunderstandings ... and sometimes I find myself wondering, is this Mass or the Maurizio Costanzo Show [a popular Italian talk show]?

At the same time, MCCs' members readily admitted that it was the emotionally charged nature of mystic rituals that attracted them to the community in the first place. The expression of emotions during these rituals allowed them to be 'free' and 'child-like', if only for a few hours a week. The ability to express one's emotions was seen as constitutive of the mystic experience, because, as the founder of Community D explained in colorful terms, 'the human being is like a donkey; to be used by God it has to be un-tied and let free to roam around'. Community members felt renewed and transformed in the process, as expressed below:

My parents sent me to Catholic school as a child and I learnt how to pray. They taught me all the prayers in the Catholic tradition [...] I knew them by heart and that was it [...]. But after a while they don't mean anything, they are so standardized. They are written, they are codified – always the same. You can add your own thoughts, but when you do, you do it quietly. The first time I attended a mystic service things changed for me. Prayer came from the heart, and you see it in people's smiles. It is transformative.

As the quote above suggests, mystic rituals deeply impacted organization members' view of their identity: as Catholics they respected the traditions of the Church, but as mystics they broke away from these traditions and experienced strong emotions. This tension was exacerbated when the participants recounted inviting friends and family to their communities' rituals and making sense of these outsiders' reactions. Below we report an example of an organization member whose brother had just visited the community:

This is not how we grew up. I also used to think poorly of these shows [rituals characterized by strong emotional displays]. It took me a while to understand that you can be both ... that I am both [a mystic and a good Catholic].

In sum, the display of emotions during religious rituals led community members to experience a contradiction in the prescribed practices of mysticism and mainstream Catholicism, with significant implications for their identities.

### Evangelizing

Our participants often referred to evangelization – the preaching of the Christian Gospel and the recruitment of new supporters (Gould, 1991) – as an essential achievement of their communities. Most community members commented on the ‘unstoppable’ growth of their MCCs, notwithstanding their lack of action, as reported below:

I remember that [name] had put together some flyers to invite people to our prayers. But she forgot to distribute them [...] she was worried that nobody would show up to our prayers. I told her not to worry. The next day we got to the chapel and it was full – around 500 people were waiting for us.

Despite the positive emotions associated with fulfilling their role of evangelization within the Catholic Church, our participants perceived a tension between what they defined as the Church’s ‘active’ approach to evangelization and their communities’ ‘passive’ approach. Traditionally, the Church’s strategy of membership retention and growth consisted of fulfilling local communities’ needs, for instance through the construction and management of schools and hospitals. Schools were perceived as critical to the mission and future of the Church because they provided early exposure to Catholic teachings and traditions (Brock & Fraser, 2001). Catholic schools were often attached to a parish, with the pastor providing spiritual and administrative leadership; school days were structured around Catholic religious observances. This was true even when the majority of pupils were not Catholic (e.g., Ridge, 2006). Similarly, in Catholic hospitals, women religious worked as nurses as well as ‘missionaries’ who offered living testament of the Catholic theology (Nelson, 2010). Mysticism, instead, prescribed a ‘passive’ approach to evangelizing that community members found difficult to justify. As one put it:

By June we could no longer fit people in our chapel. There were people everywhere! We did nothing to attract all these people ... and we cannot really take credit for that. People ask us, how do you do it? It is not easy to explain.

Since organization members were cultural insiders of the Church (Fitzsimmons, Lee, & Brannen, 2013), who had been socialized in mainstream Catholicism and still defined

themselves as Catholics, they experienced their communities' practices of letting go, praying, and simply waiting for others to join in as challenging, as the quote below exemplifies:

Sometimes I ask [name of the founder]: why do we sit around and pray and talk, when people out there are lonely, sick, and hungry? We could do so much here. But we attract people because of who we are, not what we do. Because you can help others by cooking food or by showing them how happy you are. If you have a spring in your step, it is the most powerful testimony of your joy.

In conclusion, given the Church's emphasis on an active engagement with the world, organization members found it difficult to account for their contemplative approach to growth.

### Performing miracles

A final area that our participants identified as a source of institutional contradictions was the performance of miracles – broadly defined here as events that defy scientific explanation and that often consist of medically inexplicable healings (Parigi, 2012). Our interviewees emphasized that miracles were an integral part of their life as mystics:

We have received incredible gifts ... couples who came here ready to sign the divorce papers who found a way to reconcile ... people who had lost the use of their hands who felt great again ... we have witnessed one miracle after another.

In this context, the experience of miracles was not only recurrent but, in certain cases, even predictably so (e.g., 'every first Friday of the month'). While our participants argued that miracles in their communities were ordinary occurrences performed by ordinary people, they were also aware that for mainstream Catholicism miracles were rare, exceptional events, and the exclusive domain of a limited set of highly gifted individuals (the saints), whose actions had to be thoroughly scrutinized before being included in the canon, or list, of recognized saints (Parigi, 2012). Cognizant of this institutional contradiction, community members distinguished their miracles as 'everyday prophets and healers' from the works of saints. As one participant put it:

We don't speak to animals or resuscitate the dead – we are not St. Francis, or St. Anthony. But we rekindle people's faith and cure ailments like depression and arthritis ... these are everyday miracles, and very real ones. If you go to our annual convention, you will see these miracles happen one after the other.

In sum, individuals experienced a tension in regards to the performance of miracles, which they believed to be an expression of the divine in everyday life, and, at the same time, the exclusive mark of sainthood.

#### Emotional attachment to the status quo

Although organization members reported experiencing institutional contradictions in these four spheres of their everyday life, they never expressed discontent, anger, or frustration towards their organization. Rather, our participants aimed at maintaining the status quo, because it allowed them to live a 'fulfilled and joyful life in union with the divine'. One community member described the experience in the following terms:

Once you experience these charismata, the Spirit fills you up and there is no going back, it's like being born for a second time, a renewal of who you are. I look at myself in the mirror and do not even recognize the person that looks back at me ... it is through this community that I have finally found myself, because now I have experienced joy.

Because of this strong emotional attachment, our participants did not wish to change nor exit their community (Creed et al., 2010; Hirschman, 1970). Instead, they argued that mysticism had to be interpreted as a religious experience rooted in the Church:

Community A ... is not a movement, or an organization, that I can join and then leave when I change my mind, or it does not fit my interests anymore. A is a stream of grace, a stream of grace within Mother Church that makes you thirsty for more.

Since organization members were emotionally attached to the status quo, but found the logics of mysticism and Catholicism often conflicting in their everyday life, they relied on two mechanisms to ameliorate their experience of contradictions, distancing and embedding.

#### **Identity work: Distancing and embedding**

The term 'distancing' includes identity statements used to consciously dissociate from healers, cults, and others spiritual movements, while 'embedding' refers to identity statements geared at casting mysticism as a long-standing expression of religiosity within the Catholic Church. These mechanisms were social-psychological in nature: psychological, because individuals used them to reduce the anxieties tied to the

personal experience of conflicting identity prescriptions; and social, because organization members drew the raw materials for their identity work from the social setting to which they belonged (Pratt et al., 2006), leading to recurring 'strategies' (Goffman, 1963) or 'patterns' (Snow & Anderson, 1987) in how they managed the experience of institutional contradictions.

#### Distancing: A sober intoxication

Members of MCCs were aware that, in the Italian context, mysticism was labeled as a magical, irrational, and profoundly anti-intellectual religious movement – 'a world populated by spirits and mysterious powers' (Marzano, 2008, p. 66) that was often equated with a primitive expression of religious beliefs closer to cults and superstitions than to the well-established institution of the Catholic Church. Rather than directly justifying mysticism and its practices, community members often leveraged the stories of illegitimate others to label their experience as a 'sober intoxication' (Cantalamessa, 2005) – a state of intoxication or drunkenness, but sober in comparison with the unrestrained practices of 'deviants', as the quote below exemplifies:

The Church knows what we are doing ... that we receive prophecies, that there are healings at our services, and we sing in tongues. We do not fit the traditional [Catholic] mold, but they [Church bishops] have always been on our side and that it's a path to spiritual growth. There are communities that have caused scandals. These are what people refer to as magicians. We are very cautious then. We know how to tell a gifted person from a charlatan, who is after his own personal power.

The stories of 'out there' and 'scandalous' individuals or communities were told not only to distance them from illegitimate others but also to increase MCCs' proximity to the Catholic Church by highlighting their joint opposition to deviant practices. Even a member of Community B, whose founder had been sentenced to three years of imprisonment for fraud in the 1990s, still distanced her organization from other MCCs that had been disbanded after healings were promised in exchange for large sums of money.

Community members relied on distancing to alleviate many of the identity tensions deriving from the four dimensions of activity discussed above: joining the community, reciting prayers, evangelizing, and performing miracles. For example, the founder of Community C contrasted his decision to establish a new religious group, centered

around prayer, with the founding of ‘false movements’, centered around ‘empty promises’. In his words:

I did not choose [to found Community C] but the calling was real ... it was not a business opportunity, a way to fatten my bank account, like the false movement of Mamma Ebe, whether or not she was sincerely misled. I am a Catholic with a mystic calling.

Distancing also allowed for a reconciliation of the perceived contradiction regarding the expression of emotions during religious rituals, because, as the quote below illustrates, this mechanism helped draw the line between individuals’ emotional expressivity and pure spectacles meant to draw in an audience:

As you have seen, we speak in tongues and let go ... just let go ... but we don’t choreograph Mass as if it were a show; we can’t control how it’s going, and who’s going to speak. The celebrant is just a moderator of the Spirit, not a TV conductor or an entertainer, you know, like those guys that fill stadiums with adoring fans.

To justify their communities’ contemplative approach to evangelization, organization members distanced themselves from the predatory practices of healers and cults, which were simply geared at improving the financial conditions of a person or a group. Similarly, many participants argued that, unlike the miracles of illegitimate groups, which occurred on demand and in exchange for money, miracles in MCCs manifested themselves during religious rituals open to the public and were signs of the ‘strength of the Holy Spirit’, rather than of the exceptional abilities of an individual (Marzano, 2008). In sum, through distancing, the illegitimate side of organization members’ religious experience temporarily appeared to be well within the realm of the acceptable and much more proximate to mainstream Catholicism, mitigating community members’ perceptions of institutional contradictions.

#### Embedding: The appeal of tradition

Our participants used distancing in conjunction with a second mechanism, embedding. While the term embeddedness has been used to stress the importance of individuals’ positions in social networks (Granovetter, 1985), in this context embedding refers to the reflexive attempt of positioning one’s identity within an established web of practices and beliefs. The logic behind embedding as a way to mitigate the experience of contradictions was that the conflicting elements of one’s identity became congruent, legitimate, and valuable when read as part of a broader institutional identity. More

specifically, rather than emphasizing the novelty of their religious organizational form or 'editing out' uncomfortable elements of their identity (Anteby & Molnár, 2012), members of these communities resolved their experience of contradiction by appealing to 'tradition' – a cultural inheritance that offered a sense of continuity with the past (Dacin & Dacin, 2008).

In this context, the term tradition referred to three different phenomena: the history of the Church, a shared language of religious texts, and the Church's authority over MCCs. In its first connotation, tradition was invoked to discuss the long-standing historical split between asceticism and mysticism (Kroll & Bachrach, 2006). To this end, community members leveraged the stories of mystics whose behavior had originally raised suspicions, but then proved to be an authentic expression of faith; an example of such mystics was Padre Pio, a friar who had lived in Italy at the turn of the 20th century and who had achieved vast notoriety for bearing the stigmata. After numerous investigations, in the 1960s the Church dismissed all the accusations against Padre Pio and officially canonized him in 2002.

By providing evidence of the historical ambivalence of the Catholic Church towards mysticism and the vindication of mystics in many instances, participants felt that their own experience of contradictions was only temporary and destined to be resolved over time. As one participant vividly explained:

When you look at things at the ground level they do not make sense, it is chaos ... people are confused ... but if you take a different perspective, and look at the history of Mother Church, things do make sense, and you feel small, and your preoccupations seem small, because it all makes sense – we are just another expression of faith and people like St. Teresa and Catherine of Siena and Padre Pio are there to prove it.

Organization members relied on appeals to the history of the Church to reconcile, for example, the conflicting use of emotions in mystic (expressed emotions) vs. mainstream (controlled emotions) religious rituals, pointing out that early Christians' rituals were supposedly more 'joyous' and characterized by less distance between the celebrant and the audience. Current opposition within the Church to mystic rituals had then to be seen as a sign of a healthy tension between two coexisting religious orientations, as one community member explained:

We belong to the historical stream of mysticism that was there from the beginning ... and if there is a tension [with mainstream Catholicism] it is a positive one; it is healthy

because it brings to life my spiritual path, because I keep asking myself questions, and adjusting my path.

Similarly, some participants recalled the story of Saint Paul – a Jewish person and Roman citizen who had initially oppressed Christians until he was struck by an intense vision that led to his conversion – to make sense of their own non-choice in terms of joining or founding a mystic community. Saint Paul's experience on the road to Damascus was both a choice to embrace a new religion but also a non-choice that resulted from divine intervention. To provide an historical justification for MCCs' contemplative approach to evangelization, others drew attention to the impressive religious legacy of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a French mystic who had lived her life in a cloistered religious community, with little to no contact with outsiders.

In its second meaning, tradition referred to a shared language of religious texts. As cultural insiders (Fitzsimmons et al., 2013), MCCs' members not only were fluent in the language of Catholicism and its associated practices and values, but they also used artifacts of its discourse (Brannen et al., 2014) – sacred texts, theological references, and prayer books – to demonstrate their legitimacy within the institution. For example, many of our participants argued that the use of the Catholic 'professional discourse' (Brannen et al., 2014) was meant to prevent the hazards potentially associated with mysticism:

The leader of the prayers needs to be thoroughly prepared; you are not following your own thoughts or emotions when you lead a prayer, but you are a vessel and you can be a vessel only if you have studied the Bible and prayed enough. That's why I had to be trained in [Catholic] theology.

In other words, Catholic religious texts represented a cultural anchor (Ghaziani & Baldassarri, 2011) that guided and constrained mystics' multifaceted and ebullient religious expression. As such, they were also used to evaluate the experience of specific supernatural events such as healings and prophecies. In the words of the founder of a community:

When somebody has a unique experience – they faint during prayer or start speaking in an incomprehensible language – we look at the Texts, to see how others have lived the same testimony, and managed it ...this is how we test and verify our experiences, by comparing them with the knowledge and experience of the Church.



It is through the use of the same artifacts that community members could reconcile the contradictions, stemming, for example, from the routine experience of supernatural events, as one member explained:

Take, for example, 'resting in the spirit' [the phenomenon of fainting during a religious ritual]. One can say it's [a] psychological [phenomenon], but for me it's not, because in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke speaks about Peter falling into a trance, and this also happened to Paul on his way to Damascus. If the Bible says so, then we just need to remind ourselves of that.

In its third meaning, tradition referred to the Catholic Church's involvement and formal authority in drawing and patrolling the fine line (Zerubavel, 1991) between the legitimate and the illegitimate for MCCs, as the quote below exemplifies:

We were assigned to Father M [a Catholic priest] ... well, in the 1980s he started visiting us to keep an eye on what we were doing – he clearly did not trust us – but over time he ended up becoming our friend and guide.

Another participant, reflecting on news in the media about a notorious mystic, who had performed many healings over the years in exchange for money and was eventually arrested for fraud, argued that her miracles should have never been taken seriously, since she lacked a formal Church acknowledgement. In line with this point, many community members noticed that the 'Great Mother', or 'Mother Church', was in charge of approving the communities' spiritual guidebook, conferred them use of churches, chapels, and parcels of land, sent representatives to evaluate a community's orthodoxy in beliefs and practices, provided guidance in theological and administrative matters, and, finally, held the authority of excommunication and dissolution of a community. Organization members believed that the involvement and authority of the Church over MCCs ensured their embedding within a well-established tradition, hence minimizing their experience of institutional contradictions.

#### Temporary identity truces

This study shows that identity work can be used to make sense of institutional contradictions in everyday organizational life. Although community members could 'pass' as normal (Goffman, 1963) – no outward signs revealed their mystic orientation – they still struggled to justify to themselves what they believed in and practiced on a routine basis. Recurrent identity work helped them construct and assert a positive

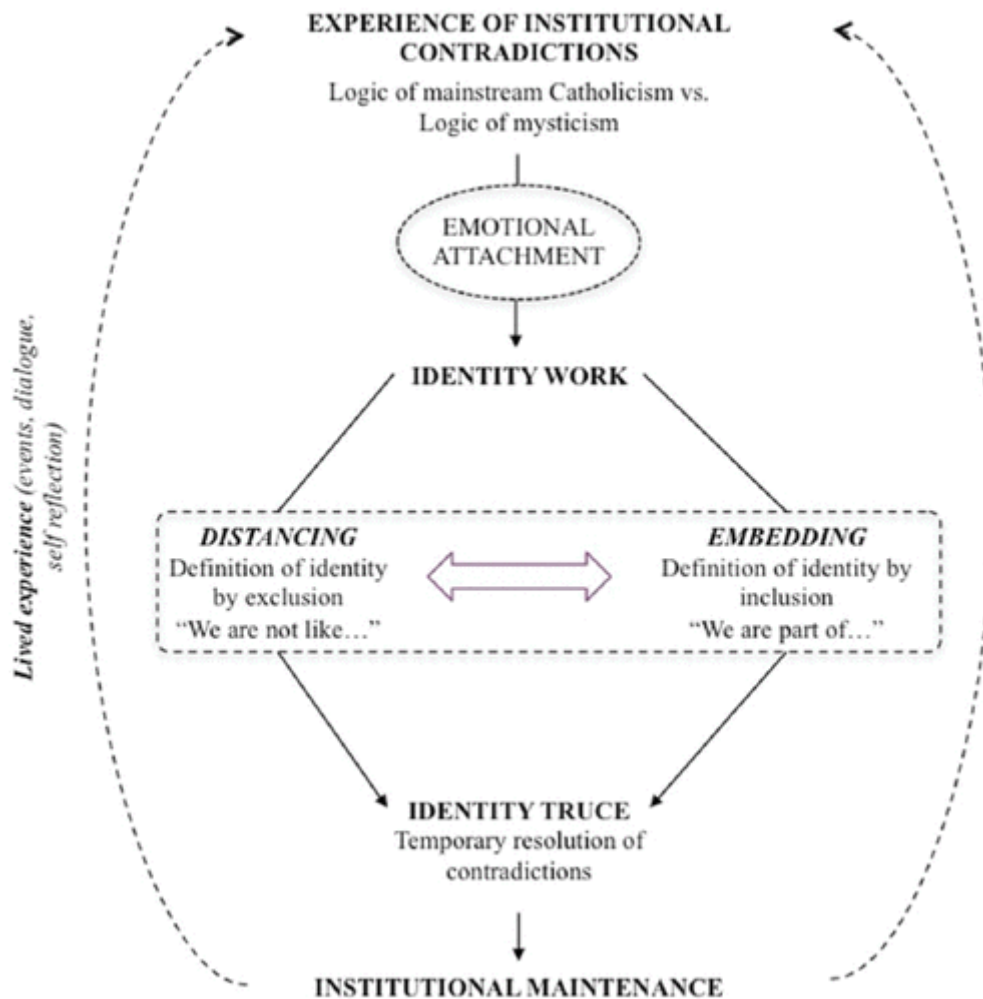
identity that reconciled the contradictory prescriptions of mystic Catholicism. More specifically, by drawing boundaries between oneself and illegitimate others (distancing) and by placing one's identity within a broader tradition (embedding), contradictions were not fully resolved, but only mitigated, as one participant put it:

When I talk about what we do here it makes sense and I understand where it is all coming from, our history, and the saints before us and the stories we see when we all get together and pray ... but I still worry; if my sister, or even a friend, makes a comment, I feel this surge, and I need to remind myself: this is our way, among many ways.

The experience of institutional contradictions was common not only among neophytes, but also longstanding community members, as exemplified by a community founder below:

When I look at what I do here, and I think of who I was [a university professor], I cannot see how the two can go together ... but they are pieces of a bigger puzzle, and whenever I think of it, I remind myself of that ... I might not see it now, but I know we are walking in the right path ... a valuable spiritual calling within Mother Church.

In sum, unlike research focused on identity construction and evolution (Ibarra, 1999), identity work in this study consisted of repair work that was geared at the maintenance and reproduction of an identity to which organization members were deeply attached. This commitment prevented members from using their experience of contradiction as a starting point for change. Figure 3 offers a stylized representation of this dynamic process.



**Figure 3.** A dynamic model of managing institutional contradictions in everyday life.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this study we set out to examine how organization members resolve, or at least ameliorate, their experience of institutional contradictions in everyday life without engaging in change-oriented agency. Research has until now focused on how the resolution of contradictions can prompt a shift in organization members' consciousness (Creed et al., 2010; Seo & Creed, 2002), which results in change (Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014; Friedland & Alford, 1991). With this article we aim at shedding light on the less explored mechanisms of managing institutional contradictions when organization members do not consider change a viable option, for example because of an emotional attachment to the institution (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013) or because of the hybrid mission of the organization (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). In these instances, organization members need to resolve their experience of contradictions, but at the

same time they hold dear the two or more logics that provide them with conflicting identity prescriptions.

Based on an inductive, qualitative analysis of four religious communities in Italy, we found that in their everyday life, organization members managed the experience of institutional contradictions by engaging in identity work (Creed et al., 2010) that helped in temporarily resolving – but not suppressing or eliminating – the tensions that surface when logics offer identity prescriptions that are not aligned. More specifically, organization members struggled to reconcile the logic of mainstream Catholicism, equated in this context with common sense and rationality, and the logic of mysticism, associated with the experience of the irrational and supernatural. The tensions between these two logics seemed to emerge along four particular spheres of activity of community life: the choice of founding or joining a MCC, prayer rituals, evangelization efforts, and the performance of miracles. Organization members ameliorated their experience of contradiction by relying on two main mechanisms: *distancing* themselves from illegitimate others and *embedding* their identity within the Catholic tradition. Both mechanisms helped individuals reach a temporary identity truce that mitigated the experience of contradictions while maintaining their identity as mystic Catholics. By documenting how actors can routinely manage conflicting prescriptions that are constitutive of an institution, we extend current research's focus on institutional contradictions as a problem that can be resolved only at the firm level through compartmentalization (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) or as a prompt for change that can gradually realign institutional beliefs and practices (Creed et al., 2010).

#### Identity work and institutional maintenance

This study also contributes to the nascent literature on institutional maintenance by showing how individuals' experience of contradictions can fuel the reproduction of the status quo. While contradictions and ambiguities have traditionally been associated with opportunities for endogenous change (Clemens & Cook, 1999), we show how individuals can recurrently make sense of these contradictions and, by doing so, reproduce existing institutional arrangements. Recent work has argued that institutional maintenance is far from automatic and mindless, as had been previously assumed (Jepperson, 1991); rather, it requires work (Lawrence et al., 2009). Such work can amount to repairs of breakdowns in practice (Lok & De Rond, 2013) or in the appointment of institutional custodians (Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010). We contribute to this line of research by showing that in some instances the work of institutional

maintenance takes the form of identity work as individuals struggle to resolve ongoing contradictions and achieve a coherent sense of self (Giddens, 1991). In other words, we argue that maintenance work can entail the marshaling of tangible resources – such as money, time, and talent to recreate community experiences (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013) reproduce a boat race (Lok & De Rond, 2013) and perpetuate sophisticated dining rituals (Dacin et al., 2010) – as well as symbolic resources – such as identity work geared to the construction of one's identity (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003), even in the face of glaring institutional contradictions.

### Emotions in institutional life

The identity work in which community members routinely engaged to achieve a consistent sense of self brings to the fore the role of emotions in shaping individuals' interests and preferences (e.g., Vince & Mazen, 2014). Scholars have argued that when negative emotions arise from the experience of contradictions, people cognitively divest from the status quo and begin envisioning alternative institutional arrangements (Voronov & Vince, 2012). Recently, scholars have zeroed in on specific types of emotions, such as shame (Creed et al., 2014), which can prompt individuals to take action.

Our study takes our understanding of emotions a step further, by bringing attention to the *intensity* of emotions in understanding individuals' behaviors in institutions. The intense emotions of joy, love, and awe that our participants experienced in their everyday institutional life precluded, or at least set aside, tacitly rational calculations and cost-benefit analyses. Even if it was costly for community members to periodically engage in identity work to mitigate their experience of contradictions, they were not willing to forgo what they loved (Friedland, Mohr, Roose, & Gardinali, 2014; Friedland, 2013b) – their identity as mystic Catholics. Hence we argue that intense emotions may trigger a shift in institutions from a logic of thinking to a logic of feeling. Further research is needed to develop a distinct language of evaluation and accounting of this profoundly different logic beyond economic metaphors (Friedland, 2013a).

### Identity work as symbolic boundaries

Scholars have recently argued that identity work hinges on the skillful use of cultural resources to increase individuals' collective awareness as the first step to laying the foundations for institutional change (Creed et al., 2010; Giorgi et al., 2014). In this article we complement this work by bringing attention to the importance of symbolic

boundaries – ‘conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space’ (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168) – as an instrument for effective identity work. In this article we identified two mechanisms, distancing and embedding, that community members used to draw boundaries and construct their identity. While distancing contributed to the drawing of boundaries by defining *exclusion* – who is not like us – embedding worked by outlining *inclusion* – who we are like.

### ***Distancing***

The first mechanism that we identified for drawing symbolic boundaries and managing institutional contradictions is distancing. Building on Goffman’s (1968) work on patients in mental institutions, Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1348) noticed that ‘when individuals have to enact roles, associate with others, or utilize institutions that imply social identities inconsistent with their actual or desired self-conceptions, they may attempt to distance themselves from those roles, associations, and institutions’. Similarly, Anteby (2010) observed that, in the context of US trade in human cadavers for medical education, anatomists distanced themselves from body brokers to define their own practices as moral and legitimate. In our study, community members leveraged the stories of ‘charlatans’ and ‘magicians’ that posed as mystics to identify more radical groups and scapegoat them (Sarkar, 2009). By excluding certain groups from the bounds of legitimate mysticism, community members shifted attention and blame (Suchman, 1995) and, by comparison, gained a sense of normalcy.

### ***Embedding***

Such boundaries were further defined and patrolled through the use of a second mechanism: embedding. Embedding consisted of enclosing one’s identity within the *tradition* of the Catholic Church as a way to provide it with meaning and worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Rather than simply noticing their official status as Catholic communities, community members narrated the stories of controversial mystics and their eventual redemption as saints to neutralize current controversies surrounding MCCs and anchor their experiences within an established and legitimate tradition. By doing so, they capitalized on the emotional appeal of tradition, which can infuse with meaning a variety of events (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; Lok & De Rond, 2013).

## Identity work and everyday agency

Together, these mechanisms also show that actors do not simply comply with logics that concatenate to act as inescapable ‘codes’ of thinking and behavior (Rao & Giorgi, 2006); rather, individuals can exercise flexibility in their everyday use of logics to achieve their goals. Recent research has shown that people in a court can mix-and-match logics to ensure the smooth functioning of the institution (McPherson & Sauder, 2013), and reinsurance traders can navigate the institutional complexity of two apparently conflicting logics (the market and community logics) by making them complementary in everyday practice (Smets et al., 2015). We extend this line of work by showing that logics can be used flexibly not only for the benefit of *external* audiences – to strengthen the persuasiveness of one’s argument or to balance the conflicting demands of fellow traders and shareholders – but also to mitigate *internal* experiences of contradiction.

Through identity work, community members exercised much more agency than traditional research on logics would accord them; in other words, rather than being constrained by institutional complexity, these individuals creatively mediated conflicting institutional demands and asserted identities that combined elements of both. By defining themselves as both mystics and Catholics, in certain instances they used the logic of mainstream Catholicism to distance their practices from stigmatized others, such as clairvoyants, healers, and cults, and gain a sense of respectability and legitimacy. In other instances, they invoked the logic of mysticism to justify supernatural practices and the experience of strong positive emotions that they did not enjoy in mainstream Catholicism. In sum, this flexibility in the use of logics attests to the importance of agency in institutional life, not only for envisioning new projects of change but also for mitigating the potential negative effects and even reaping the benefits of conflicting yet coexisting logics.

Overall, our study contributes to research on identity work by showing how identity can be defined through the drawing of symbolic boundaries that define cultural membership and difference. By integrating these mechanisms of distancing and embedding in a theoretical model that shows how organization members experience institutional contradictions in everyday life and recursively engage in identity work to resolve them, we show the cyclical process of ‘rebirth’ through which ‘institutional value is reproduced, brought alive once again’ (Friedland, 2013a, p. 22) in contexts rife with contradictions.

## Applying our model to other settings

Our context of mystic religious communities may limit the generalizability of our findings to other settings for two main reasons: the unique cultural role of contradictions and the intensity of emotions experienced in this context. First, unresolved contradictions seem much more acceptable in religious communities, centered on the mystery of the divine, than in a business setting, characterized by an emphasis on predictability and control. More specifically, one could argue that in a business environment the ongoing experience of conflicting identity prescriptions is more likely to prompt a definitive resolution of such tensions, for example through role specialization. Yet there is also evidence to suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Our study shows that even members of religious communities were uncomfortable with contradictions and struggled to construct a coherent selfhood. Also, recent research shows that conflicting logics can coexist even in business settings without necessarily prompting change. For example, in their study of reinsurance trading in Lloyd's of London, Smets and his colleagues (2015, p. 933) found that market actors competed 'over ratings, market share, and profits' and at the same time displayed a sense of community that made them favor 'long-term relationships over short-term profits', balancing the two logics with 'a striking ease'. Similarly, employees of The Big Issue in the UK or Goodwill in the US routinely struggle to balance social and commercial agendas, which are both essential to their mission (Battilana, Sengul, Pache, & Model, 2015).

Second, it could be argued that the intensity of emotions that individuals experienced in this context poses a limitation to the generalizability of our findings, because community members described emotions, such as child-like joy and awe, which cannot be easily found in the lived experience of business organizations. Hence, we expect that in the absence of such intense emotions, individuals will be more likely to resort to other strategies for managing institutional contradictions, such as exit or voice (Hirschman, 1970). For example, in this context, community members could have demanded a redefinition of the role of MCCs within the Church or an extension of the Church's doctrine to include mystics' 'ordinary miracles'. However, recent research shows that even in business settings people can experience intense emotions that promote attachment to the status quo. For example, founders, creative workers, and entrepreneurs can feel so strongly about their products or ideas that they struggle to disengage from their organizations and move on (e.g., Rouse, 2015). This research seems to corroborate the argument that there are multiple 'gods' of institutional life (Friedland, 2013a) – science, art, or money, for example. The study of religious



organizations can then be seen as an important mirror to study institutional micro-processes across a variety of settings (Friedland, 2013a, 2013b).

In conclusion, in this article we have shown that institutional contradictions are not always a source of change, but that their effects depend on individuals' emotional attachment to an institution and their identity work. Indeed, contradictions can be a prompt for the purposeful and reflective maintenance of institutions, bolstering rather than undermining prevailing arrangements in everyday life.

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### **Notes**

1. In the Catholic Church, the term indicates consecrated women who have taken the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

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